1. Marriage and Partnership in a Changing Social Landscape

Marital partners initiate and develop their current relationships in a societal climate that is very different from mid 20th century's context. In the same way, marital and intimate life underwent several external and internal changes during the past decades. By marking these broad social contours, this chapter aims to illuminate the social forces being at work in spousal daily experiences and evaluations of their partnership.

Because marital experiences at the micro-level cannot be fully captured without taking the larger social context into consideration, the first section of this chapter draws attention to major socio-demographic changes characterizing the second half of the 20th century as well as to the structural and cultural factors put forward to explain it. Since the present study deals with Dutch couples, Dutch material is used to illustrate the demographic trends.[1]

In the second section, the socio-demographic discussion is situated within the broader theoretical perspective of individualization and emotionalisation. Specific emphasis is placed on the vulnerable character of marriages today as well as on the identity-building function of current partnership.

The third section addresses the consequences of the described demographic and social transformations for spousal experiences at the micro-level. Specifically, attention is paid to gender-specific and parental issues prevalent in contemporary marriage.

[1] The evolution of Dutch partnership throughout the past three decades is extensively described in the Family Report [Gezinsrapport], which was published in 1997 by the Dutch Secretary of State of Public Health, Welfare and Sport and the Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands (SCPON) (Van Praag & Niphuis-Nell, 1997). In this section the contributions of various authors to this Family Report will be overviewed to highlight the findings of interest for the present study. Main attention will be paid to married couples with children, as the latter constitutes the sample of this research.

1.1. DEMOGRAPHICAL ISSUES

The first paragraph deals with recent external and internal transformations characterizing Dutch family and marital life. The interpretations of these transformations are discussed in the second paragraph. Because the shifts in family and marital life are a source of serious social concern, the third paragraph endeavors to put this social debate in the proper perspective.

1.1.1. The 'New' Outlook of Dutch Partnership

Half a century ago, the landscape of private life was less diverse than it is now. The ideal construct of the typical family dovetailed more or less with the empirical reality; most people left the parental home to get married young, promptly had several children and stayed with their partner until death. All sociological and demographic indicators pointed to what later would be identified as the *standard life course (*Dumon, 1997). Within this standard course, there was little room for individual experimentation: gender roles and expectations were clearly delineated and socially accepted. (Matthijs & Van den Troost, 1998).

Since the seventies, this standard family pattern underwent rapid quantitative and qualitative transformations. Almost all Western countries witnessed a downturn in fertility and in the intensity of (re)marriage. Whereas in the Netherlands married couples with children still represented 56% of the households in 1960, today they account for about one out of three households.

This evolution can be partially put down to the total *fertility* rate, decreasing from 3.11 children in 1960 to 1.53 in 1995. Dutch couples do not only opt for fewer children but they also prefer to have them later in life. Of the female cohort born in 1945, 59% had their first child at the age of 25 whereas this is only true for 19% of the women born in 1970. Moreover, it appears that nowhere in Western Europe the mean age of mothers at the birth of their first child - i.e. 28.5 years in 1995 - is as high as in Dutch society (Kuijsten & Schulze, 1997). According to van Praag (1997) postponement of child bearing is so strongly pronounced in the Netherlands due to a strong existent ideology of individual self-development and

the relatively lack of the necessary social provisions to fulfill this cultural desire.

Besides the decrease in fertility rates, the numerical and social popularity of marriage began to wane in the '70s. Although van Praag (1997) asserts that marriage remains by far the most common tool through which families are formed in the Netherlands, the preamble to marriage has changed since the seventies (Van Praag, 1997). The evolution of age at first marriage attests for this changed prelude. For men, the mean age at first marriage increased substantially from 26.8 years in 1960 to 29.7 in 1995. For women, these figures are respectively 24.5 and 27.3 years. These statistics echo a tendency to delay marriage and to initiate intimate relationships in different ways than fifty years ago (Kuijsten & Schulze, 1997).

This quantitative decline of marriage was, however, not indicative of a diminished enthusiasm towards relationships. On the contrary, it was largely compensated by the social desire to *cohabit*. Today, unmarried cohabitation is a phenomenon occurring at all social levels. This "*normalization*" of the cohabitation phenomenon does not only play an important part in couples' postponement of marriage but also increasingly functions as a durable alternative to it. Therefore, public marriage seems concurring with informal marriage (Latten & De Graaf, 1997; Latten, 2004).

Alongside the rise in cohabitation, the institution of marriage further wanes in importance due to rising *divorce* rates. Whereas in 1960 only 5.7% of Dutch marital dissolutions were ended by divorce, this figure raised to 37% in 1995. Although these statistics demonstrate that the majority of marriages still end by the death of one of the partners, the divorce risk (i.e. the likelihood that a marriage will be ended by divorce considering the contemporary divorce figures) considerably increased to about one out of three marriages ending in divorce. In the last decade of the 20th century, divorced couples had been married for about 12 to 13 years when they broke up. The mean age of men at the time of divorce was 42,7 in 2002. At the beginning of the nineties this was 39,9 years. During this period the mean age of women at divorce increased from 37,1 to 39,8. Experiencing a divorce is also socially influenced. Highly-educated women in the Netherlands are more likely to break up than lower-educated women. This holds for women born in the period 1945-1954 as well as for those born ten years

later and might be due to the higher economic independence of these women or to the less likely presence of children (de Graaf, 2000).

The divorce explosion is historically a completely new phenomenon with a plethora of individual and social outcomes (Matthijs & Van den Troost, 1998; Vanhove & Matthijs, 2002). One of these outcomes is the effect of imitation or *social contagion*. Because divorce has become so common, more people take advantage of the opportunity. Hence, people now enter marriage with a set of risks and choices unknown to their parents.

These quantitative transformations are also associated with qualitative shifts. The greater involvement of women in education and employment during the '70s and '80s meant a real challenge for couples in harmonizing professional and family responsibilities. In the Netherlands, women's participation in the labor market was a slowly progressing phenomenon and until recently, it was low as compared to other West-European countries. This situation has changed. Whereas in 1960 only 7% of married women had a paid job, this figure increased to about one out of two in 1995 (Alders, Latten, Pool, & Esveldt, 2003; Niphuis-Nell & de Beer, 1997). With a participation level of 53%, Dutch women now leave Spanish, Italian, Greek, Irish and Belgian women behind them.

Despite the increase in female employment, husbands' and wives' earnings continue to be unequal due to women's high level of part-time labor (Niphuis-Nell & de Beer, 1997). Compared to other Western countries, part-time employment in the Netherlands is by far the highest (see Table 1.1.). Whereas at the end of the seventies, Swedish and Norwegian women still surpassed their Dutch counterparts with respect to part-time employment, two decades later the latter largely outnumbered them. Halfway the nineties, about two out of three Dutch women were employed on a part-time contract whereas this is only true for 16% of men (Kuijsten & Schulze, 1997). These figures indicate that the increase in Dutch women's employment during the last decades is mainly due to their strong part-time employment. Apparently, women 'benefited' more from the relative strong growth of part-time jobs in the Netherlands (Latten & De Graaf, 1997). It is unclear, however, whether women's participation is cause or consequence. Did women decide to participate more in the labor market because of the availability of part-time jobs or did employers create more part-time jobs because their employees preferred it?

Table 1.1
Part-time Employed Women in Some Western Countries, 1979-1995
(% of the Labor Force)

	1979	1983	1995
Norway	51.7	54.9	46.6
Sweden	46.0	45.9	40.3
Belgium	16.5	19.7	29.8
France	17.0	20.1	28.9
Netherlands	44.0	50.3	67.2
Italy	10.6	9.4	12.7

Source: OECD, 1996

Thus far, we have not specifically focused on women with children. When considering *mothers* in particular, it appears that in the last two decades of the 20th century their employment levels show a continuous rise as well, indicating the weakening of the barrier of parenthood for women's participation in the labor market (Kuijsten & Schulze, 1997). In accordance with the general trend, women with children seldom work full-time (Kuijsten & Schulze, 1997). Apparently, they solve the compatibility problem between a paid job and childcare by working part-time.

Besides the increased possibility of part-time employment, the rise in mothers' labor participation might also reflect the larger supply of informal childcare arrangements. Until the eighties, the Netherlands endorsed a *non-interventionist* or *implicit* family policy (Dumon, 1991; Jonker, 1990). Instead of encouraging women to enter and remain in the work force, policy in the Netherlands rather induced mothers to stay home (Mills, 2000). It was only at the beginning of the nineties that an *emancipation* policy was established, resulting in the availability of formal (subsidized) childcare and more flexible regulations of maternity leave (Kuijsten & Schulze, 1997; Niphuis-Nell & de Beer, 1997). Thus until then, the steady increase in mothers' employ-

ment was therefore a phenomenon that evolved in spite of the absence of structural incentives, rather than because of incentives[2].

At the couple level, Dutch mothers' employment situation implies that the two-income family does not frequently occur among couples with children (Niphuis-Nell & de Beer, 1997). With the arrival of children, the typical 'one-earning family', with the husband as major provider, or the 'one and a half-earner model', with the husband as main provider, become the dominant models. This is especially true for lower educated couples but although in lesser extent for middle- and higher-educated pairs.

The unequal participation of the sexes in full-time and part-time employment may be a significant impediment to implementing labor division *inside* the family and to usher in new forms of social pressure such as shifting power balances between men and women. Therefore, the question arises to what degree external divisions of labor in the Netherlands have an internal pendant as regards household and childrearing tasks. From Table 1.2 it becomes clear that in all stages of the family life cycle, the time mothers spend on household and childrearing tasks sharply exceeds that of fathers (Van der Lippe, 1997). As children become older, Dutch mothers seem to spend more time at childrearing tasks but less on household chores. Fathers, in contrast, spend less time on both household and childrearing tasks as children grow up.

[2] This policy as regards to the (lack of) availability of public services making family life compatible with women's demand for economic independence caused Esping-Andersen (1999) to classify the Dutch welfare state as a conservative regime. Nonetheless, the Netherlands cannot be totally subsumed under a conservative heading as Dutch policy also emphasizes income maintenance (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

Table 1.2
Hours per Week and Trend (1975-1995) in Spending Household and Childrearing Tasks of (Married) Cohabitating Husbands and Wives in the Netherlands, According to Age of the Youngest Child

	Women		Men	
	1995	Trend [a]	1995	Trend [a]
Youngest child 0-5 years				
Household tasks	26.0	--	8.6	++
Childrearing	19.6	++	8.4	++
Youngest child 6-14 years				
Household tasks	28.3	--	9.9	++
Childrearing	6.7	--	2.6	no change
Youngest child > 14 years				
Household tasks	30.4	-	7.7	no change
Childrearing	2.7	no change	0.5	no change

Source: Van der Lippe, 1997
[a] --/++ significant at 1%-level, +/- significant at 5%-level

The conclusions about the evolution in husbands and wives' participation in family labor are somewhat more optimistic. By means of '+' or '-', Table 1.2 also indicates whether significantly more or less time is spent at that specific task during the period 1975-1995. As can be seen, the past decades have witnessed a decrease in women doing family tasks while men spend more time at these tasks than twenty years ago. At least this is true for fathers of which the youngest child is 5 years old maximum. When the youngest child is at least 14 years old, no significant change shows up. For women, largest 'positive' change took place with respect to childrearing tasks when the youngest child is between 0 and 5 years old. Overall, these findings support the idea that young fathers and mothers significantly changed their behavior with respect to childcare, paving the way for propagating the phenomenon of the 'new father' in the next generations.

1.1.2. Transitions in Partnership Interpreted

The aforementioned family changes were accompanied by other major shifts in society such as secularization, birth control, expansion of the welfare state and the emancipation of women (Beck, 1992; Espenshade, 1985; Van de Kaa, 1987). At a theoretical level, demographers have usually defined the structural and cultural family changes since the '60s as the *second demographic transition* (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988; Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986).

According to several authors (Ariès, 1980; Lesthaeghe, 1993; 1999; Shorter, 1975), clear distinctions can be identified between the demographic changes that took place prior to the 1950s and those brought about by the baby boom generation since the 1960s. In contrast to the *first demographic transition*[3] during which the 'traditional' family model became dominant, the second transition was associated with a more individualistic partnership model, directed towards self-fulfillment and quality of partnership. Compared to spouses in the first half of the 20th century, marital partners increasingly sought getting more personal satisfaction out of a relationship (Lesthaeghe, 1993). In this way, a considerable part of the second demographic transition does not relate to classical demographic orientation points such as birth and death, but rather to changes in partnership and family functions. Therefore, it can be identified as a qualitative rather than a quantitative transformation (Matthijs, 2001).

It is definitely not a sinecure to establish causal lines in the transformations within the private sphere. One of the reasons is that family functions and behavior reflect individual, dyadic as well as broader social tensions and desires (Matthijs, 2001). As a result, explanations put forward in the literature to understand individuals' private behavior remain limited and can merely offer general frameworks rather than claiming strong explanatory power (Straver, van der Heiden, & van der Vliet, 1994). The explanatory efforts revolve around economic or cultural aspects as forces of change.

Economic explanations contend that the labor division between women and men provides the primary incentive to form stable unions (Becker, 1981). The economic emancipation of women is therefore argued

[3] The first demographic transition (period between 1880 and 1930) was characterized by a decrease in mortality as well as a decrease in marital fertility.

to be the cause of the weakening of marriage, leading to a reduction of women's economic gains in marriage and simultaneously to an increase in opportunity costs. The time women once spent on household labor now represents a high cost given the fact that they can exploit this time in the labor market. According to this economic line of reasoning, the shift in marital behavior is the outcome of micro-economical utility calculations driven by changing sex roles, female labor market participation and the increased cost of children. This economic reasoning, however, has been criticized by some authors, among them Oppenheimer (1994; 2001). She states that, although it is closely connected to long-held views of traditional family functioning, this economic theory of marriage encounters, among other difficulties, the problem that the assumed beneficial effect of sex-role specialization, i.e. the traditional division of labor, is also related to individual and social costs. A traditional labor division may be disadvantageous because a temporary or permanent loss of one 'specialist' may endanger the well-being of the whole family.

Besides economically oriented explanations, the demographic changes since the '60s cannot be separated from Inglehart's (1977) *silent revolution*. Inglehart stresses a shift in dominant values as the force behind family change. This shift from 'materialist' values towards 'post-materialism' reflects a Maslowian evolution in which growing welfare and economical security resulted in emphasizing self-expression and quality of life. As such, concerns about 'having', are replaced by concerns about 'being' (Lesthaeghe, 1987).

This dynamic is associated with the erosion of normative prescriptions and the emergence of individual autonomy (Lesthaeghe, 1999). The latter, however, does not point to egocentric behavior but to the fact that external norms are no longer taken for granted. Everyone 'makes' his/her own life. This manifestation of individual independence and the associated change in values is illustrated by Dutch trend data (see Table 1.3), showing that non-traditional and egalitarian values gradually emerged and spread after World War II. The new set of values of increased individual autonomy concerning norms, values and life styles along with a waning influence of traditional institutions was the breeding ground for the pluralization and informalization of living forms (Halman, 1991; Latten, 2004).

However, instead of pinning down the recent family transitions to either an economic or a cultural explanation, Lesthaeghe (1999) pleads for not solely relying on one set of factors but instead considering both the economic and cultural aspects in tandem to capture the current state of intimate affairs.

Table 1.3
Value Changes in the Netherlands: 1965-1984 (% of Survey Respondents Agreeing with Value Statements)

	'65 –69	'70 -74	'75-'79	'80 -84
Sexual relations permitted if intention is to marry	21	60	59	72
Husbands' unfaithfulness acceptable	20	46	49	/
Virginity not to be preserved before marriage	29	62	/	/
Tolerance for homosexuality	56	69	84	/
Divorce inadmissible if children still home	48	13	9	6
Voluntary childlessness is acceptable	22	60	70	83

Source: Lesthaeghe, 1999

1.1.3. Much Ado About What?

Sociologists use 'big words' like *de-standardization* of family patterns or the *pluralization* of family life to indicate the breakdown of traditionally prescribed foundations and the emancipation of the private sphere (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Mills, 2000). The latter have caused marriage to become one among others. Strong pillars, however, are not easily removed. The current social 'playground' and in specific the vulnerable character of marriage is a considerable cause for concern and *fin de siècle* anxiety. The concern is mainly centered on the functional loss of the family as well as on the pursuit of self-fulfillment at the expense of private commitment (Lewis, 2001; Popenoe, 1993).

The former is the result of a social process of *functional differentiation*, which developed with the transition from a traditional to a (post)modern

society. In this structural process, previous multifunctional institutions are split up into unifunctional institutions (Felling, Peters & Scheepers, 2000). In this way, a multitude of social systems developed side by side; each with their own finality. The family system became a specialized agency with demarcated sex roles, i.e. instrumental roles for men and expressive roles for women. Also within one system such as the family, different subsystems developed autonomously and hence the parental and the spousal system are increasingly split up too. Matthijs (2000) typifies this emancipation within the private sphere as *expressive segmentation*. It essentially concerns a similar process as functional differentiation at the broad social level, which carves its way at lower levels and even at the individual level. Actually, it is the cultural pendant of functional differentiation: individuals within the new unifunctional and specialized institutions increasingly function as independent subjects who are relatively free to decide on their own life project.

Through this differentiation process the family as a social system has lost some of its previous functions. From its original functions, such as the economical, socializing, religious, and affective/procreative function, only the latter has remained as vigorous as in prior eras. Popenoe (1993) is one of the strong adherents of the idea that this functional loss is detrimental[4]. He raises great concern about the family as a weakening institution in carrying out its traditional functions and claims that "Families have lost power functions, social power and authority over their members. They have grown smaller in size, less stable and shorter in life span. People have become less willing to invest time, money and energy in the family, turning instead to investments in themselves" (Popenoe, 1993, p. 528).

Apparently, the social worry does not only relate to the de-institutionalization and differentiation of family life, but also to the de-investment and higher valorization of the individual. In line with the latter, a recurring theme in this debate is the negative effect of women's employment and its consequences for the partner, children and the organization of family life. Other authors, however, accentuate the new opportunities and functional gains that modern family life has to offer. According to Kellerhals (1998),

[4] The conclusion that the family would have lost is production function is contested. According to Esping-Andersen (1999, p. 48) the family might no longer represent the main unit of production, but it surely does provide non-monetarized goods and services.

for example, the importance of the contemporary family lies in its personal identification dimension. Since many of the choices family members currently make are merely options instead of socially prescribed patterns, it has become difficult to find coherence in the development of one's identity (Giddens, 1991). Within the affective climate of the family, individuals can create their unity and their self-identity (see also § 1.2.2).

Table 1.4
Reasons for Divorce Retrospectively Reported by Dutch Husbands and Wives (%)

		Men	Women
Communicational problems		59	64
Incompatible characters		57	56
Sexual problems		24	29
Incompatible plans for the future		27	34
Disagreement about having children		8	9
Financial problems		14	24
Addiction problems		5	20
Infidelity		37	35
Other reasons		29	34
Among which:	Loss of interest in partner	5	5
	Social differences	4	3
	Physical or mental problems	6	3
	Job situation	4	1
	Started the relationship too young	1	2
	Family/children	1	2
	Abuse	/	7

Source: de Graaf, 2000

Families also fulfill the essential function of offering emotional care and well-being to its members. The undeniable significance of this function, however, is at the same time endangered as the family increasingly stands or falls with the quality of the marital relationship. The cultural norm of

romantic love and high qualitative relationships may inflate partners' expectations to levels that are hardly feasible. Paradoxically, *individuals* may attach greater value to the importance of a close relationship while its *social* importance seems to decrease.

The qualitative character of intimate bonds also become manifest in the prerequisites for a successful marriage as reported in values studies. Factors such as 'mutual understanding and respect', 'marital fidelity' and 'understanding and tolerance' are considered the most important conditions for successful partnership (Van den Troost, 2000). Also spouses' reported reasons for divorce reveal the qualitative nature of partnership. As can be derived from Table 1.4, more than half of the Dutch divorced men and women indicated, 'incompatible characters' or communicational problems as important reasons for their broken marriage. In summary, these findings indicate that the survival of partnership increasingly hinges on the willingness to take the other partner's well-being into consideration.

According to Dumon (1974) and Scanzoni (1987) the functionality and the mutual dependency between partners should become the central point of social orientation instead of the institutional bounds or prescribed behaviors. Because intimate life is no longer a standardized but rather a *makeable* project, other models than the nuclear family can be conceived to fulfill individual needs. Not the form but the content and nature of interactions should be the criterion of differentiation.

This also becomes clear in studies on family definition. Using a sample of university students, Matthijs & Van den Troost (1998) demonstrate that by subtle weighing up of elements such as the parent-child relationship, living situation, sexual inclination or marital status, students distinguish clearly between a more emotional concept of 'family' and a more de facto or material perception of 'household'. Interpersonal configurations consisting of a parent-child relationship and of cohabitation are mostly considered as a family. Marital status, for example, appears to be less important in this consideration. The reason why a plurality of configurations is considered to be a family should be sought in their common characteristic. Apparently, they all function as person-supporting systems (Dumon, 1997).

Indeed, it appears that families, be it in different forms, continue to fulfill several emotional, psychological, social and economical functions. Intimate relationships even appear to be the key to individual happiness. In

his study *Conditions of Happiness,* Veenhoven (1984) confirms that people with a steady life partner are happier than people who live alone. In the US and the Netherlands, the differences have even grown in the post-war decades. As to marriages in specific, recent analyses demonstrate that the strong association between marriage and well-being is not primarily due to social selection processes - i.e. individuals with particular characteristics are more prone to marry - but rather to the protective effect of the relationship on individuals (Gove et al., 2000; Kim & McKenry, 2002). According to Gove et al. (2000) the strong association between marital relations and general happiness is caused by the intimate and expressive characteristics of a relationship rather than by the instrumental ones.

This brings us back to the aforementioned qualitative nature of the second demographic transition. Lesthaeghe (1999) identifies the *quality of dyadic relations* as an important motivation underlying this transition. "Quality" can be defined as characteristics of an object that are valued by the user (Lesthaeghe, 1993). Since it is an essential feature of a relationship that not one but two users are involved, its quality evaluation depends on the fulfillment of both partners' desires. The belief that recent family changes are motivated by relationship quality may be derived from the fact that the early rise of divorce was borne by the baby boom generation, being socialized in the conviction that marriage is a lifelong commitment "for better or for worse" (Lesthaeghe, 1999).

In conclusion, relationships in general and marriages in specific still fulfill vital functions, contributing to individuals' general well-being. More than ever, the expressive side of the marital picture came to the fore. Therefore, the foundations of social worry regarding marital and family life seem to be dictated by the loss of traditional institutions and habits, rather than by the validity of claiming moral deterioration or decline. This argument will be further elaborated in the next section.

1.2. THEORETICAL ISSUES

As indicated above, the modernization of society is characterized by many interdependent processes such as industrialization, specialization, urbanization and geographic mobility. These structural processes also have a cultural pendant of secularization and growing individualization, mirroring a transi-

tion from tradition- and religion-based values towards an emphasis on personal autonomy and individual preference (Halman & Ester, 1995). In this respect, it is often mistakenly assumed that individualization equals egoism. In contrast, though, individualization refers to the process in which traditional meaning-delivering systems diminish in importance. Hence, this concept needs to be distinguished from individualism as individual autonomy in decision making. However, the loss of social prescriptions along with the broad pattern of options that has become available for individuals in different areas of life has created both risks and opportunities for the marital relationship. Theoretical thinking about these risks and opportunities will be described below in function of the consequences for the intimate and marital sphere. The discussion elucidates that alongside new living forms and options, 'traditional' marriage is also in motion.

1.2.1. The Homo Optionis: Choice, Risk and Partnership

In the *standard biography* of the 50s, sexuality, reproduction, partnership and marriage were inextricably bound up with each other (Giddens, 1992). Everyone traveled along the same roads of intimate life, guided by clear and externally controlled expectations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This standard biography has now been replaced by a *choice biography* (Wouters, 1985). Few aspects of individual action follow a socially preordained path. Whether one marries or not and how one shapes his/her intimate relationships have largely become matters of choice. In this respect, partners' mental horizons are broadened. This is not to say that individuals cannot make decisions based on traditional norms and prescriptions. They can. The difference is that this decision is no longer obvious and that a plethora of options have become available: one can reproduce without sex or have sex without reproduction or partnership (Giddens, 1992). All these agreements depend on the partners legitimating them. As a result, personal life consists of an endless chain of decisions. The individual has actually become an actor.

The source for acting also increasingly becomes the individual and not a social collectivity. This idea is precisely the meaning of the concept individualization. Individualization does not refer to the content but to the source of meaning (Beck, 1992; Laermans, 1993; Lewis, 2001). Therefore,

in an individualized society, individuals must learn to conceive themselves as the center of action, as the planning office of their own biography, relationships and so on (Beck, 1992, p. 135). Paradoxically, this freedom of action and choice also creates new constraints; everyone is now obliged to make and justify his or her choices. In this way, there is now a 'new' social pressure for self-constraint (Beck, 1992; Lammertyn, 1998).

The image of the 'active actor' also applies to partners choosing a lifelong marital commitment. Marital partners are confronted with multiple options and choices that direct them to one or another outcome at a particular point in time. Because one can walk along non-institutionalized and therefore various roads, choices and decisions are potentially insecure and uncertain. By analogy with Beck's (1992) *Risk Society,* the choice biography is essentially a *risk biography*. This risk culture implies that individuals (are forced to) reflexively organize and 'calculate' the pros and cons of their (future) actions. For example, some individuals may decide not to marry because of their awareness of high divorce rates or the experience of their parents' divorce; whereas others can choose to enter the institution with the idea that leaving it is much easier than half a century ago.

The choice to marry, however, enrolls individuals in a changed 'traditional' institution that is now part of a risk society. The inside character of marriage is changed and its meaning is evolved because marriage no longer *establishes* a couple (Mills, 2000). To marry has become an individual and risky decision today. The reasons are well known. First of all, the stability of marriage is not as externally controlled as five decades ago (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Society has created ways of leaving this institution. Even the presence of children does no longer strongly cement the marital system. Second, it seems that relationships in general and marital relationships in particular need to prove their value *hic et nunc*. Duration depends on the energy invested by the partners. In this way, breaking up a relationship is a 'forced' or 'obliged' choice. Those who do not succeed in developing a successful relationship are now held responsible for this outcome. What is more, they have to justify their pursuit of a less successful arrangement, since other choices and options are possible. This results in new social mechanisms coming to the fore. Apparently, cohabitators now upgrade their partnership at the expense of marriage. Since they engage in a 'non-

institutionalized' partnership, they feel the need to choose more consciously for their partner.

The social fact that relationships cannot be taken for granted implies that they have to be continually made explicit and actively maintained from within (van der Avort, 1987). This is what Giddens (1992) defines as the *pure relationship*. This type of relationship is not socially anchored to kinship networks or tradition, but reflexively organized by the couple itself. Key sustaining dynamics are mutual intimacy, open communication and the appreciation of each other's unique qualities (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999). In essence, the pure relationship is a democratic system because it is supposed to be a reciprocal and open relationship between equals who are freed from the ballast of rigid expectations (Giddens, 1992).

However, the strong emphasis on individual's responsibility in Beck's and Giddens's view, might obscure the social construction of risks that continue to exist. Therefore, intimacy and relational satisfaction are still social products. Beyond the uniqueness of each relationship, the evaluations and emotional states associated with private life have their roots in social definitions and meanings. The social, economic and cultural contexts in which partners act, outline the options that are recognized and the choices that are made (Allan, 1993). Therefore, developing satisfactory relationships involves knowledge of appropriate relationship models. This is not to say that socially agreed scripts regarding relationships are overly specified and deterministic, rather it points towards the social boundaries in which partners can 'freely' act and make 'risky' decisions.

According to Comaille (1998) the persisting existence of social boundaries results in a contradictory situation. Even though current private constellation can be seen as liberation from traditional constraints, individuals have an unequal access to new private arrangements. Due to unequal personal resources (social class, age or gender), individuals are differently exposed to risks. Risks are not democratic but inscribed in social hierarchy and power relationships. We do not take decisions and choices in a social vacuum but need to bear for example, working conditions or policy decisions in mind, when making our own biographies. This points to the close tie between private life and structural factors outside our reach. Hence, we are faced with difficulties and risks that we can hardly deal with.

Especially less advantaged groups in our society are proportionally more affected by cumulative risks fostered by this new climate (Mills, 2000).

1.2.2. Emotionality, Identity, Stability and Vulnerability

As a consequence of increased individual freedom of choice and due to the self-produced biography, it is sometimes asserted that the meaning of existence has been lost. People experience a loss of inner stability because identities are less pre-given and many reference frames have become candidates in providing meaning and offering a personal anchoring place (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Individuals should have lost their well-steering vehicle to find their place in a complex and socially wider environment.

Things were different in pre-industrial societies, providing individuals with a consistent view of life and a stable self-definition. Personal identity was tied up to the roles and specific functions of individuals (Pattyn & Van Liedekerke, 2001). In the transition to a more complex and mobile society, however, individuals have become more self-reliant and independent. This freeing of the individual implies that one has to develop his/her own personal identity. Thus not roles and functions of an individual but the human behind them are central (Pattyn & Van Liedekerke, 2001). The social identity is replaced by a self-identity.

It appears that the private sphere represents an important area for individuals to seek psychological stability and to develop their self-identity (Giddens, 1992; Gove et al., 2000). Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1995) identify this historically new identity as *person-related stability*. This term refers to the fact that our emotional and mental stability has become increasingly dependent on the close support and love of others. To the degree that traditional anchor points are disappearing 'the other' increasingly represents a reference point to give meaning to our lives.

Against this background, marriage plays a crucial part in what Berger and Kellner (1964) already described in the 60s as *nomos*-building, referring to the process through which individuals construct a meaningful and consistent reality. In this process each partner's definitions and interpretations of reality must be continually correlated with the other partner's. Berger and Kellner (1964, p. 64) state that "this process […] is ideal-typically one in which reality is crystallized, narrowed and stabilized. Ambivalences are con-

verted into certainties. Typifications of self and of others become settled." To put it simply, through continuous and intense dialogue with the other, men and women build up their own subworld with shared expectations, beliefs, habits and experiences. Therefore, the development of close relationships increasingly relies upon the internalization of another persons' view of the world. By lack of external standards and outside authorities, partners' selves are increasingly defined and (re)created by internal standards This creation of an intimate *nomos* world facilitates the quest for finding one's self.

The statement coined by Berger and Kellner (1964), has been critisized, however, for ignoring the issue of power in intimate relationships and for neglecting the tension between identity and stability (Askham, 1976; Ferree, 1990). With respect to the former, it must be stressed that marital business is not symmetrical but rather asymmetrical. Therefore, Berger and Kellner have overemphasized the autonomy that men and women have in creating their self-identity within marriage. Whereas the authors might be correct in their understanding of marriage as an ongoing-process and open dialogue, they ignore the fact that not everything needs to be discussed in a relationship (Askham, 1976). Although the search for identity might require open communication, the search for stability might require the reverse, i.e. not every preference is articulated and some conversations are avoided. Hence, the tension between identity and stability - i.e. between the creation of a sense of self and the importance of continuation of the relationship - substantially pervades the marital dialogue (Lewis, 2001).

It is precisely this tension that touches the fragility of current partnership. Societies with a strong hierarchical structure leave little room for this kind of dialogue and for the freeing of individuals' emotional households. Actually, love and emotions are a threat to social hierarchy (Borscheid, 1986; Shorter, 1975). That is the reason why economic considerations and property concerns, which primarily regulated marriages in a more traditional society, provided more stability for marriage than love, which is intrinsically unstable. Love is a risk.

The love between men and women is prone to failure. Therefore, marriage became a risky business (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This is not to say that husbands and wives attach less importance to intimate relationships or that they are less committed (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

On the contrary, expectations are high; often so high that it surpasses the capabilities of the other partner. Thus, it is not the lack of consideration of the partners but rather the high standards set on living together that might explain current vulnerability in the intimate sphere (Jacobs, 2000). Because relationships are justified by their bilateral and emotional character, it is legitimate that they are also broken up when the emotional basis becomes weaker (Latten, 2004). "People marry for the sake of love and they get divorced for the sake of love" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 11).

1.3. GENDER ISSUES

In the previous sections it became clear that traditional cementing blocks are eroding to the advantage of individual experimentation. Because marriages are less externally controlled, they are increasingly established from within. Therefore, the question arises how the main figures, i.e. husbands and wives themselves, experience their intimate life and the changes it underwent. If they have distinct perceptions of their marital relationship and use different criteria to evaluate it, then marital satisfaction is not only a social product but also a gender-specific product.

1.3.1. Who Gets the Best Deal?

About thirty years ago, Bernard (1972) speculated that there are two marriages, *his* and *her* marriage, with his marital experiences more positive than hers. According to the author, the statistical basis for the argument that marriage is more beneficial for men than for women is convincing. Support might be found in the lower rates of mental illness of married men (see also Gove et al., 2000) and the higher scores of depression and anxiety reported by married women (see also Dempsey, 2002). Bernard (2002) demonstrates that these differences are related to the marital status of husbands and wives and thus not are merely sex differences.

Besides these health problems, women also report more marital problems, more negative marital feelings and less positive companionship (Bernard, 2002). This may be why women are less likely to remarry than men (Walker, 1999). Moreover, research on divorce motives illustrates that

women blame their partners more often for the breakdown of their marriage than vice versa (Matthijs, 1986).

Hence, there are indications that marriage is more advantageous for men than for women. An interesting study in this respect is that of Dempsey (2002). Husbands and wives were interviewed about their view on who gets the best deal from marriage. About three-quarters of the women and almost one out of two men reported that men got the best deal whereas only a minority of the respondents asserted that women were better off than men. Table 1.5 presents the different arguments formulated by men and women in support of their opinion. From this list it becomes clear that both husbands' and wives' arguments revolve around men's burden of being the main financial provider and women's burden of permanently delivering both emotional and household services.

Table 1.5
Arguments Formulated by Husbands and Wives on Who Gets the Best Deal from Marriage

Men get the best deal	**Women get the best deal**
Women's explanations	**Women's explanations**
Women's double burden: paid and unpaid work	Men serve as main economic provider
Women are expected to be always available	Women have opportunity to raise children
Men are looked after more than women	
Men are free from emotional and physical homework	
Men have more freedom	
Men's explanations	**Men's explanations**
Women's responsibilities at home never stop	Women are more in need of support
Mothering activity	Women are economically dependent on men
Men have more autonomy	

The contrast between the emotional labor of women and that of men (see § 1.3.2) also became clear in Rubin's (1983) study *Intimate Strangers*. In this study, Rubin (1983) vividly illustrates how men's rational instead of emotional expressions takes its toll in intimate relationships. Women complain that their partners give too little emotional support and hardly, if ever, talk about their personal emotional experiences. The connotation of men and women as *intimate strangers* is derived from the conclusion that the sexes have incompatible goals in marriage with women seeking for an empathetic partner more than men, and with men non-disclosing as a central part of their masculine identity.

Women's emotional complaints are socially significant because emotional factors play an essential part in spousal marital quality and stability with little or no constraints to stay in a less successful marriage. Therefore, women have become important social actors as to marital instability. Actually, the exploding divorce phenomenon has largely been driven by women. Women seem to initiate a divorce more often than men and they are also more deliberate in their decision (Matthijs, 1986). Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 62) put it this way, "If they were disappointed, women used to give up their hopes; nowadays they cling to their hopes and abandon their marriage".

1.3.2. The Gender Division of Emotion

The structural position of men and women seems to be at the heart of the explanation why women are more dissatisfied with marriage than men. About half a century ago, the position of men was strongly tied up to a specific role repertoire, which sociologists refer to as instrumental roles. Men were expected to provide the means and instruments to develop and maintain the family. A side effect of this position was that men not only brought in money but also derived their social status and that of their family from this external position (Dumon, 1977).

This strongly contrasts with the expressive roles traditionally associated with the female position. Women were considered to be responsible for caring, loving and parental tasks in the private sphere. The fact that women were the main suppliers of affection and emotion is sometimes referred to as the *emotional division of labor* (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993;

1995). At present, however, the gender divisions in emotional and in domestic labor continue to exist (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; 1995). Women still take the burden of household and childrearing to their account (Glorieux & Vandeweyer, 2002; Van Praag & Niphuis-Nell, 1997); they still supply more emotional care than they obtain and are the family member par excellence to whom other members vent their feelings (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993).

In reaction to this gender bias, there is a cry for 'new men' and 'new fathers'. These new male humans are now socially allowed to carry out formerly female tasks, domestic as well as expressive ones. It is striking, however, that the scientific, and in Belgium and the Netherlands also public discourse[5], is mainly concerned with husbands' domestic labor and to a lesser degree with their emotional labor in relationships. This might support Duncombe and Marsden's (1995) assertion that the gendered emotional labor is the *last frontier of gender inequality*.

Emotional asymmetry apparently accounts for the fact that in marital and divorce literature, women's marital complaints concentrate primarily on affective factors such as poor communication and lack of attention, while instrumental factors such as disagreement about household labor is less frequently mentioned (Amato & Rogers, 1997, Dempsey, 2002; Matthijs, 1986). The study of Duncombe and Marsden (1993) on longer-term relationships illustrates the argument of asymmetry and marital misunderstandings. In their interviews with 60 married or cohabitating couples, a woman affirmed that, "It is not that you necessarily want them to do the housework; it is that you want them to understand that you do it" (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993, p. 227). The pervasiveness of emotional asymmetry also becomes clear in the following citation of a male respondent "Sometimes it is easier to help more in domestic work and childcare than it is to change the tone and character of our emotional and sexual relationships" (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993, p. 232).

[5] In Belgium a large public discourse on the 'new man' was held as a result of Glorieux's study on the division of labor within the family. Popular magazines paid a lot of attention to the research findings and Mieke Vogels, the former Flemish Minister qualified for family affairs opened up a public forum on the internet as a result of the study. In the Dutch campaign "Who does what?" emphasis is also primarily put on household rather than on childrearing tasks.

Historical family research explains the gender-specific division in emotional labor as the outcome of the interplay between biology and social institutions. The emotional division of labor is socially channeled and its roots date back to the 19th century. According to Matthijs (2003), the accentuation of the affective and expressive functions of the family and the dyadic power of women became possible through women's economical exclusion in the 19th century. Women's marginalization in public life evoked a counter reaction by developing a separate female identity in the domestic sphere. Women developed a range of skills to recognize and meet the emotional needs of family members (Matthijs, 2003). They became the relational specialists. Over time, the persistence of the gender-specific arrangement led to the social reproduction of two different emotional cultures, one for men and another for women.

In this way, the historical explanation of emotional asymmetry goes further than explanations merely focusing on socialization, such as Chodorow's (1978) theory, which stresses the different separational experiences of men and women in earlier childhood. For the current discussion, the historical explanation is important because it cautions us to conclude that women's incorporation of emotional themes in their discourse occurs because women *are* relational (Fisher, 2000). Since women were excluded from the privileges of men, through which the latter confirm their identity and status, they looked for their own identity and validation in close relationships. That may also explain why men assert that they show their love in an instrumental way through shared physical activity and being a good provider (Rubin, 1983). Ignoring the social steering of this discourse, risks assessing men by feminine criteria, and hence overemphasizing emotion to the expense of instrumentality (Cancian, 1989). Men just like women are social products and changing men will imply changing broader social and economic structures (Segal, 1990).

This situation might change to the extent that women gain more equality through paid work and its consequences cannot be foreseen at the moment. Some assert that we move towards an androgynous individual adopting both feminine and masculine qualities (Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989). This would imply that it is socially accepted that men become more feminine, as advocated in the 'new man' discourse, but also that women become more masculine. It is striking to note, however, that the existent

discourse on the 'new woman' is less strongly pronounced given the fact that her role in the public sphere is socially increasingly approved.

Perhaps the break-through of the masculine/feminine transfer in stereotypical qualities is made difficult because of the loss of power that might be associated with it. The socially managed suppression of men showing their emotional needs openly represents a source of male power. Reversely, women can derive power from holding back their emotional services for men, indicating that not only economic sources but also emotional sources function as power mechanisms (Lewis, 2001). The latter is especially apparent in divorce motives. Women seem to be prepared to leave a marriage for emotional reasons. Therefore, the ability to fulfill the other partner's emotional needs and desires might have become a significant resource in current partnership.

The reason why women's ability to exert emotional power over their men remains limited, is due to the social steering of both men's suppression of their emotional needs and women's reserve to withhold emotional services for men (Duncombe & Marsden, 1995). Both are at the core of the stereotypical masculine and feminine identity. Precisely this stereotypical identity does not seem to fit very well in a social environment emphasizing emotional communication in partnership. The difficulties men might have with this behavior may emerge as a significant source of private trouble, underlying the statistics of rising divorce rates. In the near future, it seems that sustaining partnerships will increasingly demand the emotional labor of *both* partners. Or to voice Vansteenwegen (1988), "Love is a Verb".

1.3.3. The Gendered Impact of Children

Spousal marital experiences can also be illustrated by means of the role and impact of children. Notwithstanding the social fact that motherhood is a central feature of the traditional feminine identity, having children is no longer obvious and subjected to personal legitimation (Knijn, 1997). Because of the increasing spectrum of options available in one's personal life, motherhood has to compete with other roles such as women's labor market participation. Women are now forced to make choices within both realms. This choice is not evident, all the more because the meaning of having children underwent qualitative changes. In pre-industrial society, children con-

tributed to the economical well-being of the family, whereas the exact opposite is the case in post-industrial society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Children are no longer the *raison d' être* of marriage. Today, their rewarding aspect rather needs to be sought in their psychological and emotional (added) value (Knijn, 1997). This is reminiscent of the nature of current partnership as well. For both parenthood and partnership, economical motives are decreasing or disappearing and are replaced by the emotional needs of the parties involved. In this way, children may become a threat to partnership unless they can make significant contributions to the emotional well-being or self-actualization of husbands and wives (Mills, 2000).

Children may also serve as an important anchor point. Whereas other close relationships have become increasingly arbitrary and revocable bounds, the parent-child bond is non-interchangeable and permanent, not including the risk of being abandoned (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Parenthood cannot fail in the same way as love relations can. At least it would be considered deviant if it does. The different social and personal meaning attached to parenthood and partnership also becomes clear in the fact that marriage is increasingly chosen as a living form with the orientation on the child and not primarily on the partnership (Tyrell & Schulze, 1997).

This does not imply that children are beneficial for marital well-being. In contrast, parents seem to report lower marital satisfaction than non-parents and the decrease in parents' marital satisfaction often coincide with the transition to parenthood (Hooghiemstra, 1997; Twenge, Campbell & Foster, 2003). This might be due, among other things, to the reorganization of roles, the restriction of freedom clashing with one's personal development, or the expensiveness of having children. Besides, the high hopes individuals set on raising children, makes childrearing a difficult and complex task. Not only the demands placed on our intimate partners and on ourselves have risen, but so did the standards of raising children, turning parenthood into a tough psychological job (Hooghiemstra, 1997). This saddles individuals up with the difficult task of how to combine the objectives of 'wanting the best for my child', 'being a good partner' and 'living a life of my own'.

Women in particular are confronted with this dilemma and its effects, as they are still the main figures in rearing children. Moreover, in the Neth-

erlands a strong belief in the importance of the 'always-available' mother still exists (Knijn, 1997). Along with the fact that mothers are also important relational gatekeepers, marriage and motherhood have increasingly become a balancing act for women. Indeed, the more energy poured in by one family member, the less energy is left for the other (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Despite the fact that fathers hardly sacrifice labor time for raising their children, they also increasingly attach importance to an emotional-affective relationship with their children (Knijn, 1997). Society even expects them to do this.

1.4. CONCLUSION

The above discussion of social forces driving the everyday marital reality of couples unequivocally demonstrates the social relevance of our study object. Particularly, two mutual reinforcing forces meet each other within marriage. Marital partners do not only want to get more out of a relationship than fifty years ago, they are also embedded in a social climate simplifying the possibilities to leave a marriage not fulfilling their needs. The vanguard of these transformations in partnership was the baby boom generation, born between 1940 and 1955. They grew up with a relational scheme built around the complementary public and private roles of men and women. Sex role expectations were clearly delineated and individuals' identity was nourished by or even reduced to the roles one was expected to play.

Due to broad structural and cultural transformations, described in this first chapter, this clear-cut social reality has been undermined, broadening the package of options available to husbands and wives in working out their life trajectory. As a consequence, contemporary couples are now faced with new marital realities barely known half a century ago and for which they have no established models at their disposal. This may account for the difficulty of developing marriages that satisfy the needs and desires of both partners.

Four factors attract our attention in this discussion, representing a lead of departure for the present research. First, the erosion of 'tradition' resulted in changes with respect to *gender practices* and *values*. Because both relate to an upgrading of women's social position, they may represent a

potential source of marital problems. This chapter, however, also demonstrates that the *economic* position of Dutch women remains limited due to prevailing part-time labor. Related to the erosion of tradition, is the weakening impact of individuals' sex role position in building a personal identity. As husbands' and wives' *identity* is no longer exclusively based on the performance of expressive and instrumental roles, it can be supposed for the same reason as with respect to gender role behavior and attitudes, that the endorsement of a non-stereotypical identity may be a potential source of marital stress.

A second striking element is the paramount role of *communication*. Since marital relationships are increasingly maintained by the partners themselves, marital communication lies at the heart of partnerships. Its significance also becomes clear in couples' divorce motives and marital narratives. These learn that communicational problems are an important stumbling block in maintaining marital relationships. More specifically, marriages seem to be taxed by a gender-specific communication style accounting for wives more negative evaluations of their relationship.

Third, its significance notwithstanding, *parenthood* is no longer an intrinsic need in marital relationships but rather an option among many others. In this way, the presence of children may even be a threat to the relationship because other options must be given up. Because women are still held responsible for taking primary care of children, they may feel more hindered in exploiting other opportunities offering themselves, than men. These gender-specific parental experiences may put marital relationships under pressure.

A fourth noteworthy factor characterizing the transformations in partnerships is the structural inequalities that continue to exist. Not everyone acts on the basis of the same relational model. Individuals have even 'unequal' access to new relational schemata put forward by some authors. Therefore, marital satisfaction may not only be a gender-specific but also a class-specific phenomenon.

These four concerns ensuing from the social discussion introduced in this first chapter steer the present study on marital satisfaction and its underlying processes. In the following chapter, the theoretical and methodological background from this study is elaborated and the research questions are specified.

2. Towards a Research Design for Marital Satisfaction

The present research consists of six different studies examining the determinants and underlying processes of husbands and wives' satisfaction with marriage. In the first section of this chapter a general theoretical framework covering the complete set of studies is introduced. This framework, along with the themes introduced in the previous chapter, leads to the specification of six major questions. These research questions are presented in the second section. The third section gives an overview of the structure of the different studies.

2.1. IMPETUS OF THE STUDY

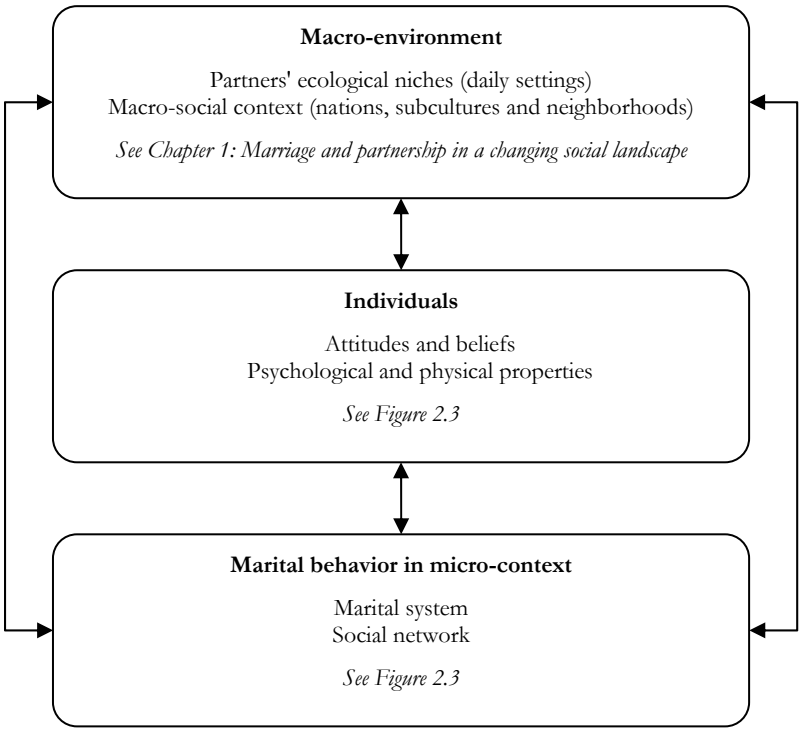
Research on the factors that contribute to marital satisfaction is prolific and dispersed among various disciplines. To organize this myriad of determinants, several authors have attempted to develop comprehensive classification schemes. These efforts proved to result in the distinction of three groups of determinants: (a) individual factors, (b) social and economic factors, and (c) dyadic factors (Holman, 2001; Lewis and Spanier, 1979).

Such classification runs parallel to the levels of analysis as distinguished in an ecological thinking on marriage (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). In his social ecology model of marriage, Huston (2000) considers three levels of analysis: (a) the individuals characterized by their own physical, psychological and cultural attributes or resources, (b) the marital relationship as a behavioral system embedded within a larger network of relationships and (c) the social context in terms of macro-social forces but also in terms of smaller ecological niches in which individuals and couples function (e.g. neighborhood). The latter is already extensively dealt with in the first chapter. The two other levels are addressed throughout the present research. As can be seen in Figure 2.1 all three levels mutually influence each other and operate in complex and interdependent ways.

As indicated above, the central aim of the present study is to examine the degree to which these individual, contextual (i.e. approximate context) and dyadic factors account for variation in spousal marital experiences. Because this objective covers a broad research agenda, a particular set of

factors or topics need to be selected. This selection is primarily made on the ground that the topics must significantly concern the everyday life of married couples and thus being consequential for spousal marital experiences. In the social definition of our research problem, as described in Chapter 1, four themes were put forward as stumbling blocks in developing intimate relations in general and a marital relationship in particular: (a) spousal social position and cultural orientations, (b) communication, (c) gender attitudes, identity and behavior, and (d) parental experiences. These themes lay the foundation of our specific research questions, addressed below.

Figure 2.1
A Three-Level Model for Viewing Marriage



Beyond the integration of issues that are assumed to significantly affect people's marital experiences, a secondary goal of this study is to make methodological as well as theoretical contributions to current marital scholarship. The proceeding of this aim involves two steps. First, the separate narratives as regards the above selected topics must be subsumed under a new overarching theory that should enable us to develop new hypotheses about the interrelationships between the distinct groups of determinants. A theory that is qualified for meeting this requirement is the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model of marriage, hereafter referred to as the VSA-model. Second, gaining insight into husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction involves, among other things, a methodological approach that can model the dyadic dependency of husbands and wives. In the remainder of this section both issues are addressed.

2.1.1. The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model of Marriage

The VSA-model of marriage is a theoretical framework that became prominent in recent thinking on marital relationships. To develop this model, the authors reviewed 115 longitudinal studies of marriage in combination with four major theoretical perspectives used to explain marital quality and stability: (a) social exchange theory, (b) behavioral theory, (c) crisis theory, and (d) attachment theory.

These four theories were evaluated in terms of three distinct criteria. First, it is questioned to what degree the theory encompasses a full set of predictors for marital outcomes and whether it provides links between different levels of analysis. Second, the theories are evaluated on their capacity to specify mechanisms of change within marriage. By stressing this feature, the authors attach great importance to *explain* how marriages accomplish different outcomes, rather than limiting oneself to *predict* why they succeed or fail. Third, it is required that the theory accounts for variability in marital outcomes, between couples as well as within couples over time.

Table 2.1
Evaluation of Theoretical Perspectives on Marriage

Criterion	Social exchange theory	Behavioral theory	Attachment theory	Crisis theory
Link micro-macro?	Barriers such as social norms may be macro whereas attractions such as interaction may be micro.	Main focus is on interaction between spouses.	Focus is on the link between childhood and adult relationships.	Links external life events to adaptation within marriage.
Mechanism for change?	Not clear how couples may change over time	Each interaction affects global marital evaluations, which in turn affect subsequent interactions.	Not clear how couples may change over time	Resources and adaptation may change in response to life events.
Within and between couple variation?	No within variation but addresses how some couples may be unhappy but stable and others happy but unstable.	Within-variation in one direction but no between-variation	No within- and between- variation	Partners with inadequate coping resources will dissolve when crises occur but may endure until then.

Source: Karney & Bradbury, 1995

Table 2.1 summarizes the results of their critical analysis, showing that no theoretical perspective satisfies all criteria. A more in-depth discussion of the similarities and differences between the distinguished theories is addressed in Karney and Bradbury (1995). Based on this theoretical analysis, the authors integrated the distinct strengths of the theoretical perspectives along with the results of their meta-analysis into a new framework, the VSA-model (see Figure 2.2). The model claims that "couples with effective adaptive processes who encounter relatively few stressful events and have few enduring vulnerabilities will experience a satisfying and stable marriage,

whereas couples with ineffective adaptive processes who must cope with many stressful events and have many enduring vulnerabilities will experience declining marital quality, separation or divorce" (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p. 25). In the following the different relationships, as visualized in Figure 2.2, will be explained in greater detail to show the integrative nature of this framework

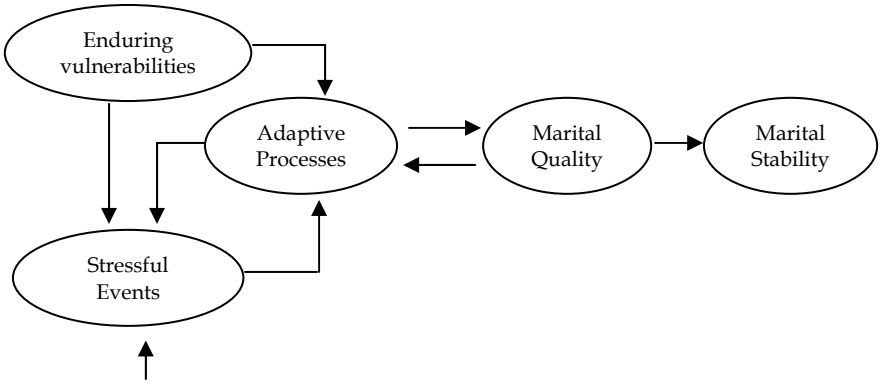
The authors define a reciprocal relationship between the ongoing processes of adaptation within marriage and the marital satisfaction experienced by the spouses. The concept of adaptation or adaptive processes is defined as the ways individuals and couples contend with differences of opinion, with individual and marital difficulties and transitions (Bradbury, 1995). It refers to how spouses regulate and manage (non) marital events (Bradbury, Cohan & Karney, 1998). Thus, adaptation primarily concerns the positive and negative marital interaction styles but may also point, for example, towards the capacity to provide social support. So far, however, marital researchers paid an almost exclusive attention to the effect of interaction on marital satisfaction, leaving open the possibility that the strength of the effect from satisfaction on interaction might be stronger than the opposite effect.

The degree to which spouses adapt depends on the stressful life events they encounter. Stressful life events refer to the developmental transitions, situations, incidents, and chronic or acute circumstances that impinge on a couple's relationship and create tension or stress (Bradbury, 1995). Among others, examples are health problems, unemployment and concerns over raising children. The attention paid to this component highlights how circumstances external to the couple affect the longitudinal course of marriage by means of spouses' adaptive processes. In line with crisis theory, it is also presumed that adaptive processes may determine the stressful experiences spouses encounter. Indeed, unsuccessful recovery may provide a context for stressful events to continue or even exacerbate.

Partners' adaptive capacity is not only related to the stressful events they encounter but also to the enduring vulnerabilities that each spouse brings into marriage. Bradbury (1995, p. 461) defines vulnerabilities as "stable demographic, historical, personality and experiential factors that individuals bring to marriage", such as educational attainments and experiences in the family of origin. These characteristics are expected to be rela-

tively stable and to 'set the stage' for marriage. In this way, they may contribute to stressful experiences encountered by the spouses and to their adaptive processes (Bradbury, Cohan & Karney, 1998). For example, some personality characteristics are associated with the arousal of stressful situations but may also cause individuals to experience events as more stressful (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Finally, an effect of marital quality on marital stability is presupposed. Declining marital quality should result in higher marital instability[6].

Figure 2.2
The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model of Marriage



Because of the close integration of theory and empirical research, the model is amenable to empirical application. The VSA-model provides a framework to pose specific questions as regards marital satisfaction and to develop a more in-depth understanding of the processes underlying marital experiences. Hence, the model endows us with a conceptual toolkit to translate the selected topics in well-delineated research problems.

[6] Note, that despite this well-replicated finding, the effect is not strong (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). This might be due to social exchange assumptions, predicting that the path from quality to stability is likely to be influenced by the barriers to leave the relationship and by attractive alternatives outside the relationship. Hence, spousal alternatives must outweigh the barriers to stay in the relationship before one decides to leave an unhappy marriage.

2.1.2. From a Conceptual to a Methodological Toolkit

Before arriving at the specification of our research questions, it is necessary to take note of the methodological implications of the VSA-model as well as the sidetracks it leaves open.

First, the added value of the VSA-model must be sought in its dynamic character. Attention is shifting away from *predicting* marital satisfaction to *explain* the processes through which marriages arrive at different outcomes. By identifying adaptive processes as a key mechanism through which external events and individual characteristics impinge on the marital system, the model includes the opportunity to examine processes underlying marital satisfaction. However, it leaves open the possibility to examine whether different processes underlie the marital experiences of husbands and wives in different social contexts (see Figure 2.1). Beyond the consideration of communication as a mediating mechanism, the present study also endeavors to grasp the dynamic character of marriage by considering moderating social contexts.

Second, the VSA-model is conceived as an abstract model that is adaptable to the specific research context in which it is used. In the present study explicit attention will be paid to the applicability of the model as regards husbands and wives' marital experiences. The reason for this emphasis relates to the shortcomings that characterize current scholarship in this respect. For the most part, research looses sight of an in-depth consideration of gender in marriage. The latter can be thought on two distinct levels. For one, a specific variable may affect men and women's marital satisfaction differently and for another, men's variables may affect the marriage in a different way than are women's. However, because in the majority of research designs data were only gathered by one of the partners, studies fail to address these specific gender questions.

Moreover, to capture the complex and dynamic nature of partnerships, the evaluation of one spouse's marital experiences, should be controlled for the characteristics of the other partner. Indeed, a defining feature of relationship research is that measurements of one partner not solely refer to the individual him/herself but also to an interpersonal system. Hence, pooling men and women's information may mask interesting interpersonal aspects of marriage. Therefore, this study attempts to capture the sheer

nature of marriage by including both partners' characteristics in the models to be tested and by evaluating the different marital experiences of husbands and wives.

2.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our central research objective is directed towards examining the degree to which contextual, individual and dyad characteristics influence spousal marital satisfaction. This objective is translated into six research questions. In the subsequent chapters of Part II, each research question is discussed in-depth and situated within the marital research field. The following section introduces the six major questions and their sub-questions.

Research question 1: How to measure marital satisfaction and communication in a valid and reliable way?

1a. Does the Dutch Marital Satisfaction and Communication Questionnaire, measuring marital satisfaction, open communication and destructive communication, represent a three factor structure?
1b. Can this factor pattern be replicated in an independent sample?
1c. Is this factor pattern stable across time?

Our first research question is addressed in Chapter 4 and is directed towards the measurement of our central object of interest. In response to both the controversial debate on the measurement of marital quality and the lack of attention paid to the measurement invariance of instruments, we examine the validity and stability of a Dutch instrument measuring (a) marital satisfaction, (b) negative communication and (c) open communication. This self-report instrument consisted initially of 24 items that were derived from the Marital Satisfaction and Stability Inventory and the Communication Inventory developed by Kerkstra (1985). The advantage of this instrument is that it covers the most frequently used indicators of marital quality, i.e. marital satisfaction and marital communication.

Using exploratory factor analysis, the factorial structure of the items is examined in a sample of Dutch husbands and wives. The reproducibility of the factor structure is explored in another independent sample by means of

confirmatory factor analysis. To demonstrate the measurement invariance of the scales, the factor structure is examined in the first sample of couples participating in the same research project five years later. Both the internal consistency of the identified scales as well as their construct validity is demonstrated.

Research question 2: What is the long-term association between communication and marital satisfaction?

2a. To what degree is communication a predictor or an outcome of marital satisfaction?
2b. Is the direction of the relation between satisfaction and communication the same for both sexes?

Chapter 5 deals with the second research question, which relates to the importance of communication in shaping current partnership. The importance and difficulties of communication are inherently associated with new images of intimate relationships in terms of individual needs and egalitarianism. The significance of communication for marital well-being has been well established both at the theoretical and the empirical level. However, in the VSA-model of Karney and Bradbury (1995), a reciprocal relationship between marital satisfaction and communication is assumed. Thus far, the opposite relationship, i.e. the degree to which marital satisfaction affects communication has received less attention and therefore the reciprocity between marital satisfaction and communication remains elusive.

Moreover, the question arises to what extent this relationship might be sex-specific. Because marriage and marital communication are shaped by two individuals, each with a particular social position, the direction of the relation between marital satisfaction and communication may be different for husbands and wives. These questions will be examined with the help of cross-lagged panel analysis.

Research question 3: How and to what degree do economic and cultural indicators relate to marital satisfaction?

3a. To what degree do spousal economic resources affect marital satisfaction?
3b. To what degree does spousal cultural orientation affect marital satisfaction, controlling for economic indicators?
3c. Do spouses' cultural orientations moderate the effect of women's employment on marital satisfaction?
3d. Do changes in economic and cultural variables relate to changes in marital satisfaction?

The third research question relates to the economic and cultural factors involved in marital experiences. At the macro-level, both economic and cultural factors are used to understand contemporary partnership (see Chapter 1). The question now arises to what degree these factors are also important in understanding husbands and wives' marital satisfaction at the micro level. Therefore, both economic and cultural dimensions are included to predict current as well as subsequent marital satisfaction and to examine the degree to which cultural variables significantly add to a model already including economic characteristics.

Besides their relative importance, we are also interested in the interaction of economic and cultural variables. In the economic debate on marital quality and stability, cultural variables are often neglected, therefore it remains unclear to what extent the effect of women's labor market participation is moderated by the attitudes held by the spouses. These questions are addressed in Chapter 6. Hierarchical regression analysis is used to examine question 3a, 3b and 3c. The last question is studied using multiple regression analysis.

Research question 4: How do stereotypical feminine and masculine qualities relate to marital satisfaction?

4a. To what degree is one's gender role identity associated with marital satisfaction and do these associations differ for husbands and wives?
4b. To what degree does gender role identity affect marital satisfaction in relation to different social contexts?

Gender roles and gender role identities have become uncertain in our rapidly changing culture (see Chapter 1). Gender role identity is part of one's personality and refers to the extent to which one incorporates stereotypical feminine and/or masculine qualities into his or her self-concept. In this part of the study we are interested in the consequences of one's gender role identity for spousal satisfaction.

As a result of the increased emotionalisation of partnership it might be expected that feminine expressive qualities contribute more positively to marital satisfaction than masculine qualities. The question arises, however, whether this assumed association is equally strong for both sexes. Moreover, it remains unclear to what extent gender role identity, which is social in nature, yields different outcomes for husbands and wives in different social contexts. These contexts are indicated by marital stage, family income, spousal educational level and whether wives are employed or not. The results of the regression analyses are described in Chapter 7.

Research question 5: Are different gender characteristics consistently related to different marital outcomes?

5a. Are distinct gender-related characteristics consistently related to marital satisfaction and marital communication, and do these associations differ between husbands and wives?

5b. Do associations between gender and marriage differ for husbands and wives in higher or lower income groups?

In the previous research question, gender role identity was conceptualized as a self-definition, i.e. the incorporation of stereotypical feminine and/or masculine qualities into one's self-concept. Some argue that this is a too limited definition of someone's gender. Attitudes towards sex roles or role behavior such as performing household labor can also be considered as indications of one's gendered position in the social structure.

Moreover, the fourth research question limited marital outcomes to marital satisfaction whereas marital communication is a significant indicator as well. The latter is interesting because identity theorists presume that a feminine identity is associated with more positive communication behavior whereas a masculine identity implies dominant and negative behavior. In

this study theoretical identity assumptions are extended to other gender characteristics than feminine and masculine qualities and to other marital outcomes than marital communication.

Because previous work only paid limited or no attention to the possibility that the complex relations between gender and marriage differ according to spouses' social position, it is additionally questioned if and how gender differently operates in different income groups. The elaboration and results of these research questions are discussed in Chapter 8.

Research question 6: If and how does parenting spill over to marital relationships?

6a. To what degree can negative communication be considered a spillover mechanism between parenting and marital satisfaction?
6b. To what degree do parents' resources and role demands affect their experiences of parenting?
6c. To what degree do parents' resources and role demands affect their experiences of marriage?
6d. To what degree can parenting be seen as a predictor or an outcome of marital satisfaction?

Drawing upon the VSA-model of Karney & Bradbury (1995) we finally examine the effects of parenting on spouses' marital experiences. As indicated in the first chapter, parents need to combine parenthood with other important objectives in life such as partnership and personal fulfillment. In Chapter 9 we examine the impact of parenting experiences on spouses' satisfaction with marriage. This relationship is addressed cross-sectionally as well as longitudinally. In the short-term analysis (cross-sectional) the aim is to predict marital satisfaction by husbands and wives' parenting experiences. More specifically, it is questioned to what degree negative communication functions as a spillover mechanism between parental experiences and spousal marital satisfaction. Three indicators of parenting will be considered: (1) parental satisfaction, (2) parental stress and (3) parental role restriction. By discerning three domains of parenting, it can be identified which aspects are an important source of marital (dis)satisfaction.

Because the experience of parenting as well as one's marriage may depend on available resources, we also assess which resources alleviate or

aggravate husbands' and wives' parenting and marital experiences. The inclusion of mothers and fathers in the same analysis, allows for the assessment of the relative influence and sex-specificity of the distinct paths.

In addition to the short-term interrelationship between parenting and marital satisfaction, the long-term associations will also be considered. Including the distinct parental aspects in different cross-lagged models, this study examines whether parenting can be seen as a predictor or an outcome of marital satisfaction and whether this association is different for fathers and mothers.

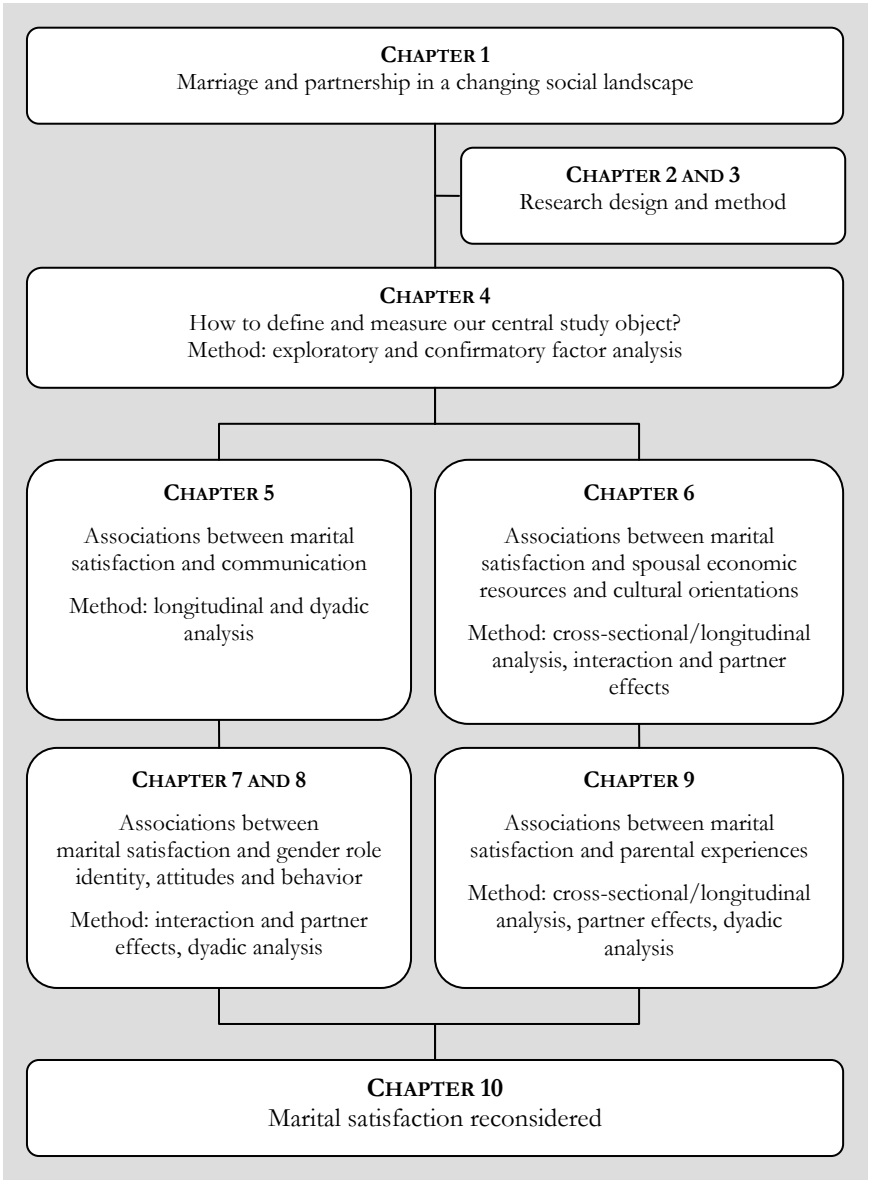
2.3. STRUCTURE OF THIS STUDY

In the following, the exploration of the aforementioned topics is presented in individual chapters. The general outline of these chapters is visualized in Figure 2.3. Chapter 1 is also depicted in this Figure because it functions as a broad preamble to our study of marital satisfaction. It dealt with the (changing) social context in which husbands and wives develop their current relationships and in which spousal marital satisfaction crystallizes.

Packed with this social baggage, we turn in Chapter 4 to the measurement of our central study object. Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, the factorial structure of marital satisfaction, open and negative communication is evaluated. Demonstrating the uniqueness of these concepts is a prerequisite for discussing the long-term relationship between marital communication and spousal marital satisfaction in Chapter 5.

As can be seen in Figure 2.3, the fourth chapter makes use of *dyadic analysis*. This term is used in the present study to specifically refer to analyses testing significant differences between husbands and wives belonging to the same dyad. Dyadic analysis needs to be distinguished from an analysis with *partner effects*. The latter is used to refer to analyses in which it is evaluated whether the characteristics of one partner affect the marital experiences of the other partner. This was for example the case in Chapter 6. This chapter examines whether spousal economic and cultural characteristics impact spousal marital satisfaction as well as the changes in satisfaction between 1990 and 1995. Specific attention is paid to the question whether cultural attitudes mitigate the effect of wives' employment on both husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction.

Figure 2.3
General Outline of This Study According to Topic and Method



Chapter 7 and 8 cover the exploration of gender in relation to spousal marital experiences. The seventh chapter explores the significance of husbands and wives' self-definitions in terms of instrumental and expressive traits. More specifically, it is attempted to investigate how and to what extent this influence varies according to marital duration and social class. Because instrumental and expressive qualities are only a limited indication for understanding how gender operates in marriage, the analysis is extended in Chapter 8 with gender role attitudes and role behavior in terms of household and childrearing tasks. Both marital satisfaction and marital communication are considered as outcomes in this analysis. Couple's income position is used as an indicator for distinguishing between higher and lower social layers in order to examine whether these gender-related characteristics play a different part in different social strata when considering distinct marital outcomes. Chapter 7 and 8 both assess differences between husbands and wives as regards gender and marital outcomes, and include the characteristics of the partner in examining the other partner's marital outcomes.

In Chapter 9 the short-term and long-term spillover of parenting experiences on marital experiences is addressed. It is examined to what degree marital communication can be considered as a mediating mechanism by means of which the parental system affects the spousal system. Moreover, structural sources that may help couples to deal more effectively with the stress and strain associated with rearing (young) adolescents are considered. Because of the reciprocal nature of both the parental and the marital system, longitudinal analyses are additionally used to investigate whether three indicators of parenting, (a) parental satisfaction, (b) parental stress and (c) parental role restriction are antecedents or rather consequences of marital satisfaction.

To conclude, Chapter 10 summarizes the key findings of the present study and critically assesses the theoretical approaches and methods that were used. By bringing the different research findings together, our findings are interpreted in light of the discussion presented in Chapter 1.

Before presenting the results of the subsequent chapters, Chapter 3 firstly deals with the method of the present study. It discusses the longitudinal data that were used, the procedure of data gathering that was followed as well as the internal and external validation of the sample.